

Something Extra EP 074 – Maria Russo

[00:00:03] **Lisa Nichols:** Chromosomes, little strands of nucleic acids and proteins are the fundamental genetic instructions that tell us who we are at birth. Most people were born with 46 chromosomes, but each year in the United States, about 6000 people are born with an extra chromosome, making them a person with Down syndrome.

[00:00:25] If you've ever encountered someone with Down's syndrome, you know that they are some of the kindest, most joyful people you'll ever meet. They truly have something extra. My name is Lisa Nichols and I have spent the last 24 years as both the CEO of Technology Partners in is the Mother to Ali.

[00:00:45] Ali has something extra in every sense of the word.

[00:00:50] I have been blessed to be by her side as she impacts everyone, she meets through these two important roles as CEO and mother to Ali. I have witnessed countless life lessons that have fundamentally changed the way I look at the world.

[00:01:04] While you may not have an extra chromosome, every leader has something extra that defines who you are. Join me as I explore this. Something extra. And leaders from all walks of life and discover how that difference in each of them has made a difference in their companies, their families, their communities and in themselves.

[00:01:30] **Lisa Nichols:** I'm thrilled to have Maria Russo on the show today. Maria is the CIO of Washington University School of Medicine. Maria, I am so thrilled to have you here today. Thank you so much for making the time. I know you're really busy and you've got a lot to do at WashU. But when you and I met, I said, I really want you to consider coming on to the podcast as a guest. And I'm just so excited for our listeners to learn from you today.

Maria Russo: Thank you. It's really nice to be here. I'm excited about being here today. Very good.

Nichols: Very good, I've got so many things I want to talk about. But let's just kind of start with growing up. What was growing up like for you?

Russo: Uou know, growing up was pretty run of the mill.

[00:02:10] You know, mom stayed at home.

[00:02:12] Dad was an engineer. In fact, my dad got me interested in computers and go into college for information services. And so that was a real pivotal point in...

Nichols: How old were you?

Russo: I was 16 and my dad would come home with these huge computers. You know, nowadays they're in our phone. Right. And, you know, in that day, it was, you know, five feet wide, you know, and he would lug them home. And I'm like, how did what do you do that and how do you do that? And so that kind of peaked a little interest.

[00:02:42] **Nichols:** So you were curious?

Russo: I was curious.

Nichols: Oh, that is wonderful. Yeah, well, and then it was, you know, really at a time when girls weren't that interested. But you were curious. You asked questions And I bet you when you asked him, your dad was thrilled.

Russo: Oh, yeah. He would show me all this stuff.

[00:03:01] You know, it's also kind of funny because I grew up in Philadelphia. And then one of the things that my dad and I would do together was work on cars. You know, I knew how to change a tire and, you know, gap the spark plugs and change of the distributor caps. Now, of course, all those engines, they don't matter. Right. I can't do any of that kind of work any more. But I think that bond also helped me. You know, as I I worked with my dad. You know, feel really comfortable about exploring what he was doing. In a different way and I think some kids might be afraid to, you know, say, well, what is that? And show me.

Nichols: That's wonderful. Did you have siblings?

Russo: I did. I'm one of four.

Nichols: Okay. And where are you in the birth order?

Russo: I'm second.

Nichols: You're second, so sisters, brothers?

Russo: Two sisters, one brother.

Nichols: Okay. So, Now, did your sisters kind of follow suit? Were they interested in what your dad was doing?

Russo: Yes. So very interestingly, my older sister was a programmer. So, yes, she followed. Well, I guess I followed more in her. But she stumbled into that differently than I did. And my younger sister is an artist and my brother is in finance.

Nichols: Okay, so all different. All dog different roads.

[00:04:09] Wow. Well, you have had quite a career. Did you go to college to pursue m.i.s or what did you. Would you pursue as an education banker?

[00:04:18] **Russo:** I did do m.i.'s management information systems was what my dad said. You know, that would be really good for you. And so I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I did that. And then when it came time to graduate, I didn't know what I was going to do again. And so an individual who had graduated before me started out working at Arthur Andersen at that time.

[00:04:38] And that's before it was Andersen Consulting and Accenture. And she said, I think you really should look at this, because while I was at college with this individual and some others, we started the information system society. And So she recommended it. I just went on an interview. I happened to get the job. And I'm like, okay, I'll just try this for a little bit. And I kind of stumbled into that.

[00:05:04] **Nichols:** And then you were probably, what, 21? 22?

Russo: Yeah, about 22. Yeah.

Nichols: I mean, I say all the time. I mean, I think that big for experience. Wow. For a young person to get to experience and you get to see so much don't you. And that consulting role in health care.

[00:05:19] **Russo:** I just kind of stumbled into health care.

Nichols: So how did that happen?

Russo: They had an a project and nobody was volunteering for. And I'm like, I'll do it. And I just loved it. And I stayed in health care the whole time as Arthur Andersen got out of health care in the early 90s. I had to find an opportunity where I could stay in health care. And I wanted to stay in consulting at that time. I really enjoyed that lifestyle. And, you know, I got to learn so much and be at the executive meetings when I was, you know, fresh out of college. What a training ground. You know, there was a whole series of things you had to do when you were at Arthur Andersen at the time. We call them green books. And, you know, I had to do all of that. So.

Nichols: So that's when you transitioned over to E&Y?

Russo: Yes, I had an opportunity to go to Ernst and Young and I started doing implementations of EMR.

Nichols: That started becoming the big thing, right?

[00:06:10] **Russo:** Yeah.

Nichols: But was it epic at the time or was no other like Cerner or other actually EMR?

[00:06:16] **Russo:** Today I can say I've implemented them all. But back then it started because I. All of my consulting was done out of Philadelphia, my my home base. It was a lot of invision, you know. Seamans Medtech. Especially that smaller hospitals that couldn't afford the largest Cerner and then some Allscripts eclipses.

[00:06:37] **Nichols:** Goodness gracious. There's not a hospital system probably in the country that has not transitioned. Right. Yes, I think they have it. They need to. So then Cap Gemini ended up buying that sector of the. E&Y is that what happened?

[00:06:54] **Russo:** Yeah, they purchased the health care consulting division of Ernst and Young. And when they did that, I was getting ready to move into a role of being an outsourced chief information officer for one of our clients. And that was the first time I had, you know, understood what a CIO was, you know. And I got a rare glimpse into being a CIO without actually being an employee of a company chair, which is a blessing and a curse a little bit, because you had like many masters, you had the client who was your real boss. And then you had your other real boss at consulting where you had, you know, all the things they have to do. You know, when you're an account manager for consulting assignment. But it was really through that experience that I realized that I would at some point in time in my career, actively look for a CIO role within a non consulting environment in a real organization.

[00:07:54] **Nichols:** Sure. So that was when you were at camp, though. Right. That you were the outsource CIO. And then I know you moved over to Deloitte, which is another awesome consulting firm. So were you in their health care division as well?

[00:08:08] **Russo:** I was. Oh, yes. And I got to, you know, interact with such awesome clients. You know, the big names in Intermountain Healthcare, Mt. Sinai Medical Center, Tenet, you know, they were my client and I've really enjoyed all of that and getting to see how things are different and done differently at each one of those organizations.

[00:08:30] **Nichols:** Absolutely. It's like a masters on steroids. I mean, as a doctor, it really. Right. Oh, my goodness. So you have been a multi time CIO now. I think you were at tanner health you were at the Jewish hospital in Louisville. Right. So, you know, I'm from Paducah, Still a Kentucky girl. So that resonates with me. And then most recently before was you you were at Kaiser Permanente. Right? In Northern California. So in all those roles, you were a CIO? And then something got you thinking about the WashU position. So what how did that all come about?

[00:09:10] **Russo:** My entire career prior to Kaiser was just the provider side, the hospital organization that provides services to patients. And then the reason I went to Kaiser was because they also were a health plan. And if you're gonna be in health care, you need to understand all sides of it. So they had, you know, the hospitals, they had the health plan and they have the medical group. And so while I was at Kaiser, I got to work very closely with the medical group there. And I thought now that would be an interesting type of role to work in a medical group. And so when the opportunity arose at Washington University School of Medicine, it was almost a no brainer, because just think about having all those different

experiences and then actually having having a position where you can be the advocate for the physician, the clinician. That was what was so appealing to me.

[00:10:07] **Nichols:** Well, is your academia that is tied to Kaiser Permanente? I don't think so, right?

[00:10:13] **Russo:** No, not the way. Of course, the you know, Washington University is. But there was an initiative to start a school of medicine at Kaiser. And so that also was very interesting. I actually worked with some of the people who were on that initiative, you know, bringing that to fruition for Kaiser. And it was very interesting to watch because of how they were thinking about educating students differently.

[00:10:39] And so little did I know that would be in my future to actually be part of something like that in a different way.

[00:10:45] **Nichols:** We are so glad that you're in St. Louis now. You're gonna be good for St. Louis and to have you here, Maria. How do you like St. Louis so far?

[00:10:53] **Russo:** I like St.. Lewis a great deal. It does remind me at home. It's very much like Philadelphia, you know. We got a nice, you know, weather climate change process, which I love. I grew up on that. So I know how to drive in the snow. So that doesn't scare me. I think a lot of people shy away from that because of the weather. But I think St. Louis's very nice. Easy to live in city.

[00:11:16] **Nichols:** I love hearing you say that. And it's always interesting to me when I have, you know, talk to people that have moved here from other places you've lived. A lot of places I've lived in. You've lived in Louisville. You've lived in California. You lived a lot of places. So for you to say, no, this is a great place to live, to raise a family. You know, those are things that feel like we need a highlight for the rest of the world.

[00:11:37] **Russo:** You know, besides the climate changes, the season changes, you know, the food is phenomenal here. I did not expect that. And so that was a very pleasant surprise. The fact that you can get any type of food and of course, I'm of Italian background.

[00:11:53] The Hill is amazing. You can get all kinds of good food here. The people are so friendly. The commute.

Nichols: Ah, yeah. You can get anywhere in 30 minutes.

Russo: Yeah. You know, not like California where my commutes I would have to get up at 5:00 a.m. just to beat the, you know, traffic. So here I can sleep a little bit later and still get to the same place at the same time.

[00:12:16] **Nichols:** Well, I concur with you on the food. Greg and I always say so many restaurants, so little time.

Russo: That's true.

Nichols: Very good. So talk to us then about what your plans are at Wash U. I mean, you've only been there for seven or eight months. So you always say, OK, what's your plan in the first hundred days? You know, they always as the president that right? So for you. I mean, what are those big things? You know, Maria, that you're going to be working on and big initiatives.

[00:12:45] **Russo:** There's many initiatives that I think will resonate very well with patients, especially some of the initiatives we have around our epic implementation where we want to, you know, open up the product and open up the access to the patients so that they can have an ease of, you know, finding a physician, getting treatments, you know, understanding all the payments. You know, they have to pay before, during and after the process if you have a surgery or if you have, you know, a procedure. So we've got a lot of initiatives that are strategic in that venue. Patient centric, you know, enabling the physicians to deliver care in a much more streamlined fashion, optimizing how they actually work with the systems that they use to document patient care. Those are some initiatives going on from that perspective. I mean, we have some infrastructure things that we want to focus on to make sure, you know, we're secure. And technology is not getting in the way of our ability to do our jobs and really look at, you know, the I.T. and the epic solution that we've implemented as a strategic asset.

[00:13:54] **Nichols:** Absolutely. Well, I want to dive further into that, but we're going to take a quick break and we'll be back with Maria rousso.

[00:14:02] **AD:** Hi, everybody. I just wanted to take a second and tell you about something. Our team at Technology Partners can do for your business. We have spent over two decades partnering with organizations and helping them solve their I.T. needs from a 360 degree

perspective. A huge part of how we solve those needs is by developing custom applications of all shapes and sizes. If your team is looking for software and an out of the box solution just isn't right. It's time to consider how we might be able to help.

[00:14:30] Go to [TPI.co/custom apps](https://TPI.co/custom-apps) and learn more about our awesome capabilities.

[00:14:38] **Nichols:** So, Maria, I know some of our listeners may be out there and they know that there is something between BJC and WashU, but they may say, I don't really understand how these two things work together. So you are the CIO for WashU? School of Medicine. Gerry Fox is the CIO for BJC. So can you give our listeners just a little bitty education on how the two work together?

[00:15:03] **Russo:** You know, the two organizations are business partners at some of those hospitals where patients receive services. The School of Medicine physicians are the ones providing some of the specialty services that the patients receive. So from that perspective, we're very tied closely together. We also share the Epic solution in our EMR system. Jerry and I actually work closely together on, you know, the things that affect both of our organizations collectively. I really enjoy the team that's being built at BJC by Jerry. So I think that's something that we'll continue to build and grow together to get to organizations.

[00:15:43] **Nichols:** So the current state of healthcare I.T., you've been in health care, I.T. You're almost your whole career. So you've seen a lot of changes. But talk to us a little bit about the current state and then what do you see? What is around the bend?

[00:15:55] **Russo:** So I think the current state is really a precursor to what I see coming around the bend. A lot of what's happening is that patients are morphing as some of the older patients move into different time of their lives. Our children, my children, child, you know, is moving through, you know, their lives. They're much more tech savvy. And so I look at that as sort of a slow moving revolution right now. It seems very fast when you're inside an organization where any health care organization where you're trying to, you know, develop and build, you know, systems to draw in the patients in a different way. And I think what's really going to happen is or what I would love to see happen as well, is that we move into a direction where everything is online. It's all about the consumer. It's consumerism you know, instead of going into a store to buy groceries, you're going into a health care facility to get treatments on whatever ails you. And I liken it to, you know, the airlines before I go onto an airplane, I'm I'm online looking at the schedule and I'm selecting my flights, the ones I want during the times that work for me.

[00:17:12] I pay for my tickets. I get my boarding pass. I know what quote unquote, seat slash room I'm going to be in. I might even know my gate. I know all of the things I should and shouldn't do. And so when I show up, I. I'm ready. I have to wait through either the security line or I have to move to, you know, if I, you know, do TSA, etc. But I liken what's going to happen in health care to what happened in the airlines. And I see us moving to a world where I'm a patient and it's two o'clock in the morning and I get up in the middle of the night and I am just not feeling well. And I want to make an appointment and I can get on my phone or my tablet and I make that appointment. And I pay my co-pay when I show up. I show up at 7 o'clock that next morning and I just walk right into room B and the physician is waiting for me there. That's how I see it. And I hope that comes to fruition.

[00:18:05] **Nichols:** I'm sure it will. I'm sure it will. So there may be some listeners out there. Maria, some women and they may be saying, well, I'm a tech leader. You know, I really think I would like to be a CIO one day. What are some of the things that they could be doing today that would help them on that journey?

[00:18:24] **Russo:** There's probably a couple of things. No career just happens to happen. You definitely have to plan it and you have to plan it by saying what are the experiences I need to move into that role. So if you're not technically knowledgeable, maybe you need to get some technical training or understand technical a different way. If you don't understand applications and how to build applications within that type of environment, then maybe that's what you have to do, but you have to plan it. You can't just say, oh, I'm just gonna be a CIO or any any career. And I think the other thing is do stuff that others don't want to do. You know, it's during those times where organizations and other leaders will notice you for the things that nobody else wanted to do. And that often gives you, you know, a little bit of a push your leg up, right as you are considered for all the opportunities that might also come out of, you know, when you're done that assignment, you know, where can you go? You'll have more opportunities to move into something you want.

[00:19:22] **Nichols:** Well, and you did that. I noted that when you said that's how you moved into health care, you said nobody else wanted that project. And you raise your hand, said, I'll take it on and just think, if you had not raise your hand, you wouldn't be. Here today. And so just taking that risk, it's a risk. Yeah, but you know, what's the worst that can happen?

[00:19:43] **Russo:** You're not a CIO in that industry. You're in a different industry.

[00:19:47] **Nichols:** That's exactly right. So do you have something in your career and you've had like, is it a very lustrous career. But what's been the most rewarding part? Would you say, of your journey?

[00:19:57] **Russo:** Yeah. You know, I think my most rewarding part is, you know, working with teams that are actually delivering what organizations need. Meeting those goals, understanding the strategic initiatives that the organizations have and thinking how do we get from where we are today to where we need to be. You can't do that without the team. You know, it's the team that made me successful and all of my consulting assignments. And it's the team that made me successful at each one of my CIO roles. And that's the truth here, too. You know, here at the School of Medicine.

[00:20:28] **Nichols:** So unpacking that. I mean, in the CIO role or in any leadership role, it is so important, isn't it, Maria, to understand the business? Why? What's the mission? What are the objectives of the business? And then how can we come along and support to move those things forward? So sometimes it's architecting a team, sometimes you may not have the right team in place to meet those objectives. So that would be part of that. And then once you've architected the team, got the team in place, empowering them. To go do what they do best. Right. So very important. We say all our time. It's not technology for technology sake. You're a business person first. So this is something extra. Can you tell me what is something extra that you have seen now or in times past in one of your team members?

[00:21:22] **Russo:** Yeah. You know, something extra for me is not just one thing. It's the culmination of many different things. And each person brings something different to that table. I think, though, there's something extra in one of my team members. It actually would be a team member here at Wash U. That individual just exhibited a passion for making sure physicians have what they need to do their jobs. So it didn't matter and doesn't matter to them whether or not that issue is their issue. They will just stop their world and they will solve the problem because they understand that the physician is the one who treats the patient. And if you're going to treat the patient, you need to make sure there's no barriers for the physician.. So that's the something extra for that person. That individual was just that drive to make sure that the patient got the best experience, which translated into the physician having a better experience.

[00:22:22] **Nichols:** Sure. Is there a story that you can think of? Maria, where there was maybe something missing in you? Something extra missing in you?

[00:22:30] **Russo:** Yeah. You know, when I was first a leader, I think there's something missing for me was really understanding how to make that connection at that executive level. And I realized that to continue in these types of roles, I needed to understand that. So I really worked very hard at trying to, you know, watch other executives find my own voice as a leader. And once you do that, that kind of puts something, you know, on the table for you to, you know, show up. One of the things that really helped me was when I was in consulting, there was a woman partner who had come to be on an assignment. And she took me into this high level executive meeting and I was just supposed to take notes.

[00:23:14] But what I observed was how she interacted with these high level executives. And that was one of the things that helped me say I want to be like them. And how do what things did she do that I want to take on? And so that's what I did. And that really helped me by observing other women leaders. I was able to craft, you know, that voice, You know, my persona. Right. My executive persona, which I think you never get rid of. Once you develop something like that, you constantly refine it.

[00:23:44] But it's always there.

Nichols: I love that. And I always say, you know, do you watch other people you observe? And I mean, I feel like in my career that I've learned so much from other people. That is one of the the ways that I have moved the needle on my growth quotient. But sometimes you watch and you say, I don't want to be that Right. But, you know, that also puts kind of the onus on us, because that means other people are watching us.

[00:24:15] **Russo:** Yeah. And, you know, you have to pick and choose who you want to be and how you want to show up. And you can't ever just take someone else's style that never works. You have to develop your own. And so part of that is also self-confidence and being able to say, I can do this and I'm gonna show up this way. It's all in you. You just have to release it.

[00:24:36] **Nichols:** That such great advice. Well, what do you believe? Is this something extra that every leader needs or the something extras, I should say, that every leader needs?

[00:24:45] **Russo:** Yeah. You know, I think there's something extras that every leader needs need to culminate in a focus on customer service. I think the number one reason organizations could potentially fail because they don't deliver good service. And so especially from an I.T.

perspective, it's very hard to deliver good service in I.T. world because things break and people don't want things to break in. And you can't always anticipate when that's going to happen and proactively stop it. But if you can figure out how to do service recovery and you can figure out how to show up as a team and give the true impression that you care about their service you're receiving. I think that is the something extra that people will notice.

[00:25:30] **Nichols:** That is awesome advice because every organization, every team has a customer. We none of us exist without a customer. So if you're not focused on the customer, that's a big misstep. So I do want to talk about one other thing here before we kind of wrap up.

[00:25:50] But kind of in my research of you, there is a gentleman that gave you an endorsement, Ben Carbonetti. When I read this, I'm like, wow, no wonder why Shoe got to Maria.

[00:26:05] You know, we courting Maria for this position because I'm thinking, my goodness, you know, and just some of the things, you know, Maria is a terrific chief information officer in health care. She's willing to help people. She plans ahead. She reduces the need to work in crisis mode. She balances all aspects of her life. Maria takes time to find enjoyment, meaning in life. She does the right thing, even if it's unpopular. I mean, there are just bullet points after bullet points after bullet points of this endorsement. And I'm just thinking, again, a good leader. It's a lot of things, isn't it?

Russo: Yeah, it is. Many, many things. But now you're embarrassing me.

Nichols: Well, I I'm just in awe. Seriously? And this particular endorsement. And I guess that kind of Segways into you. You been recognized a couple of times from wound was a really awesome words. You were highlighted in 2015 is one of the 24 women CIOs to know that had it feet good?

Russo: It felt really good.

[00:27:06] And it solidified the fact that women can be recognized as strong leaders in health care and CIO's.

[00:27:14] **Nichols:** Because in that goes on and you were another word that you received was one of the 100 hospital health care system CIOs to know. So just I mean, you were one of the

women. But then you were also one of the top CIOs in health care. So if there are aspiring women tech leaders out there, look to Maria Russo because she has done an amazing job. So what really excites you, Maria?

[00:27:44] **Russo:** Being part of an organization that does research? I've got some family history things with, you know, my mom has passed with Alzheimer's and my father's had a heart attack and there's cancer in my family. So it kind of seems like I have everything against me. You know, healthwise. But what really, really excites me is the fact that there's organizations like Washington University that are on the cusp and in the forefront of, you know, finding cures and doing this research. Just recently reading about how an organization, I want to say, in England accidentally stumbled upon what they think is the cure for cancer. Just think about how that will impact so many lives.

[00:28:27] **Nichols:** We all have been touched by someone in families with cancer.

[00:28:32] **Russo:** And so what really excites me is getting and being part of an organization that's actually out there fighting that good fight and hopefully finding cures for things that we never would have imagined. You know, 10, 20, 50 years ago. That's exciting for me. I hope all those cures come about. So anyone who's been afflicted with any of the things that are the major illnesses that are plaguing us in our old age, that we don't get those and that we can be in our old age with dignity.

[00:29:02] **Nichols:** There's certainly hope in that. There is hope in that. So I feel the same way. I feel like Wash U is a Saint Louis treasure. I really do. It's one of the something extras, staples, offers. Well, Maria, this has just been so much fun. Thank you so much for coming on. And I just know that your story is going to be inspiring and educational to our listeners. So thank you very much for making the time.

Russo: Well, thank you for having me. I've enjoyed it.